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Administration Frustrated by Leaks Exposing Foreign Policy Discords

Partisan Lower-Level Officials Seek to Influence Policy

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NEWS ANALYSIS

The firing of two Reagan administration officials who allegedly leaked classified information is a sign not only of mounting tension between government and the news media. It also illustrates the administration's frustration at having its own ideological divisions over foreign policy exposed to public view.

In both firings—of Defense Department official Michael E. Pillsbury last month and of State Department speech writer Spencer C. Warren on Friday—the alleged offenses had no relationship to conservative charges that President Reagan is the victim of liberal-leaning career bureaucrats seeking to thwart the policies of a conservative leader.

Instead, both ousted employes are conservatives who apparently sought to influence debate over controversial policies. Pillsbury, a long-time associate of Republican conservatives who believe that administration policy is dominated by moderates, was suspected of leaking information about aid to anti-communist guerrillas in Angola and Afghanistan; Warren, a lesser-known figure, reportedly admitted leaking a diplomatic cable charging House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.) with attempting to undermine Reagan's policy of pressure on Nicaragua.

Sensitivity about such disclosures has increased at a time when Reagan increasingly emphasizes covert action and combating international terrorism. Invariably, leaks about these issues spill into the area of intelligence activities that the administration considers too sensitive to disclose.

That is why concern about stemming the flow of leaks has become close to a fixation at the highest levels and has created unanimity among officials usually regarded as adversaries. It recently caused Central Intelligence Agency Director William J. Casey to threaten to employ a 1950 law prohibiting disclosure of communications intelligence against five publications that reported U.S. interception of Libyan messages.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz, frequently on the opposite side from Casey in policy debates, has become so upset at what he termed a "gusher" of leaks that he told reporters last week: "We've got to find the people who are doing it and fire them." To emphasize the seriousness of his threat, Shultz seized on the Warren case and had a department spokesman take the unprecedented step of announcing at the Friday press briefing that an official had been fired for leaking classified material.

Leaks to the news media have been a source of White House aggravation for at least two decades. In the past, though, when they involved the inner workings of government, they usually described turf fights between competing officials—for example, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance and national security affairs adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski in the Carter years.

However, in the Reagan era, the leaks have become a weapon in the ongoing policy-making struggle between such officials as Shultz, who generally follows a pragmatic approach to foreign policy while outspokenly advocating force to combat terrorism, and Casey and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, who advocate an unrelentingly tough line on Central America and arms control and other dealings with the Soviet Union.

The leaks generally come from partisan lower-level officials. Frequently they can be traced to conservatives whose allegiance is to ideology and believe that their views have been frozen out of the policy process.

Department officials, insisting that Shultz does not want to cut off the flow of "legitimate news" to the media, said he considers leaks, whether of intelligence matters or dealings with other governments, a threat to national security and is determined to force his employes to maintain confidentiality and resolve disputes through internal channels.

Casey, speaking Thursday to the American Jewish Congress "from 30 years of experience as a friend, participant and supporter of the media," insisted that "the media, like everyone else, must adhere to the law." And he stated: "I hasten to add that the first line of defense and the most effective way of preventing leaks is to increase discipline within the government itself."

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